

Washington, DC (September 8, 2011) – The House Veterans Affairs Committee met Thursday and incorporated two bills introduced by Rep. Gus Bilirakis (FL-09), Vice Chairman of the Committee, into larger veterans bills that will now head to the full House of Representatives for a vote.

[H.R. 1826 would reinstate the criminal penalties](#) on any individual who charges veterans unauthorized fees for claims before the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Though it is already a violation of the law to charge a veteran for filing a benefits claim before the VA, no federal punishment exists.

"This hole leaves the door open for fly-by-night companies and con artists to take advantage of veterans, unlawfully charging them hundreds or even thousands of dollars," Bilirakis said. "My bill would make this offense punishable by up to one year in prison and or fines. Crooked practices must be stopped, and this enforcement mechanism is a critical first step."

The markup also included [H.R. 2274, which would create an accountability mechanism](#) to ensure that the Post 9/11 Educational Assistance Program is adequately providing the education benefits intended.

"It is essential that we know the number of people using the benefit, expenditures, and the number of credit hours, certificates and degrees earned by beneficiaries, and my legislation requires that the VA report those numbers on an annual basis," Bilirakis said. "This will help ensure that the program is efficiently and effectively providing our nation's veterans with an education."

"Rep. Bilirakis has been a stalwart advocate for veterans, as well as an active member of this Committee," said Rep. Jeff Miller (FL-01), Chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs. "Through this legislation, we are ensuring that the investment we have made in our student veterans' future results in a good education and the opportunity for meaningful employment."